OIG

Audit Report

Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General

Introduction

We recently completed a review of screener performance at selected airports around the country. We began our review at the end of November 2004, and completed our field work early in February 2005. Our review was a follow-up to similar work that we had performed at the same airports in 2003. It was initiated in response to a request from the Chairman of the House Aviation Subcommittee.

Background

In 2003, we conducted an audit of the aviation security screening function at 15 domestic airports nationwide. The purpose was to evaluate compliance with federal aviation security requirements to inspect passengers and property for explosives and weapons. We identified four broad areas (training, equipment and technology, policy and procedures, and management and supervision) as the cause of most test failures, and made 7 recommendations addressing those areas that would improve overall screener performance.

We began our follow-up testing on November 29, 2004, and concluded on February 4, 2005. During that time, our two 5-person teams conducted hundreds of screening checkpoint and checked baggage tests at airports of different sizes and annual passenger loads.

We met with the Transportation Security Administration's (TSA's) Office of Internal Affairs and Program Review to discuss their internal testing. We also obtained and reviewed all pertinent TSA Security Directives and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) relating to screening of checked baggage, and passengers and their carry-on items. We designed our test protocols from the SDs and SOPs.

We obtained and discussed the SOPs and updates with TSA's Office of Transportation Security Policy on an ongoing basis. In addition, we visited the Transportation Security Laboratory (TSL) in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to discuss our test methodology and obtain technical guidance on the equipment available at the airports to screen passengers and their property. The TSL also provided us with some of the test items used during our testing.

All ten DHS OIG team members conducted each type of test on a rotating schedule, to reduce the likelihood of being recognized as a tester by the screening workforce at any specific airport, and to introduce a real world element of variety into our test methodology. At each airport, we tested early and late shifts at all or almost all open screening checkpoints and at most of the lanes at each of those checkpoints. In addition, the team also tested checked baggage explosives detection systems (EDSs) and explosives trace detection (ETD) machines (installed in both lobbies and in baggage rooms) and their operators at each airport.

Specifically, a "test" at a passenger screening checkpoint was defined as one tester attempting to take one threat object through the checkpoint into the sterile area undetected on his or her body or in his or her carry-on bag. A "test" at a checked baggage location was defined as one or two testers introducing a bag with a simulated IED in it, and contamination on the outside, into the checked baggage system. A "pass" occurred if the object was identified by screening personnel and prevented from being carried into the sterile area through the screening checkpoint or being put into the baggage system downstream from the checked baggage screening location. A "fail" occurred when the object was not detected at the screening checkpoint, or the checked bag was cleared for flight.

At each airport, we met with local law enforcement officers to notify them of our presence at the airport and the nature of our work. We also notified the Federal Security Directors (FSD) or their offices moments prior to commencing testing. At the conclusion of each test, we met with the screeners involved and their supervisors, and discussed the nature and results of the test. We also met with the FSD, or the FSD's representative if the FSD was unavailable, and the FSD's staff at each airport at the end of each testing period to summarize and discuss the results of our testing.

Results in Brief

Improvements are still needed in the screening process to ensure that dangerous prohibited items are not being carried into the sterile areas of airports, or do not enter the checked baggage system. In our report on the results of our first round of testing (OIG-04-036), which we issued in September 2004, we made several recommendations for improvements in the areas of training, equipment, policies and procedures, and management practices. **For the most part, TSA agreed with our recommendations and is taking action to implement them. However, despite the fact that the majority of screeners with whom our testers came in contact were diligent in the performance of their duties and conscious of the responsibility those duties carry, the lack of improvement since our last audit indicates that significant improvement in performance may not be possible without greater use of new technology.**

We recommended in our previous report that the TSA administrator aggressively pursue the development and deployment of innovations and improvements to aviation security technologies, particularly for checkpoint screening. **TSA is currently testing several such technologies, including backscatter x-ray, ETD portals, and document**

scanners. We encourage TSA to expedite its testing programs and give priority to technologies, such as backscatter x-ray, that will enable the screening workforce to better detect both weapons and explosives.